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SUBJECT: EGYPT ENCOURAGES UZBEK STUDENTS TO STUDY ARABIC AND ISLAM WITH FREE PROGRAMS

CLASSIFIED BY AMB. JON R. PURNELL FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶1. (C) DCM met with Egyptian Charge d'Affaires Jailan Abbas Abdel-Aziz on January 30 to discuss educational programs for Uzbeks offered by the Egyptian Government. According to Abbas Abdel-Aziz, annually 20 Uzbek undergraduates receive four-year scholarships for either Islamic or secular studies at al-Azhar, though the majority chooses to study Islam. Those without adequate Arabic receive an extra year of language training in Cairo before they begin their studies. Egypt also offers five post-graduate scholarships per year, though these are not always filled.

¶2. (SBU) Since 1995, the Egyptian Embassy has run a cultural affairs center in Tashkent that focuses on teaching Arabic. Approximately 1,000 students of varied skill-levels study there in a given year. The teaching staff comprises both Egyptians and Uzbeks. Students at al-Azhar often return to Tashkent and work in the Commission for Religious Affairs at the Cabinet of Ministers or in the Muftiate. The Muftiate is the GOU-controlled spiritual administrative body, essentially an arm of the state that carries out the will of the government regarding Islam. Religious educational establishments cannot operate without the Muftiate's permission and oversight. For those wishing to enter one of these Islamic schools, applicants must go through a series of tests and interviews on subjects such as the Koran and President Karimov.) The Egyptian Embassy also serves several Tashkent institutes and universities within their Arabic language programs.

¶3. (C) Abbas Abdel-Aziz characterized Egyptian-Uzbek relations as "good" but limited. She said that Egypt has a very small diplomatic presence in Tashkent and that there is virtually no trade between the two countries. Every year about 1,000 Uzbeks apply for Egyptian visas, mostly for tourism with a few visas issued for business or education. Few Egyptians visit Uzbekistan.

¶4. (C) Comment: Many Uzbek Islamic studies students seek to study at al-Azhar, the premier Islamic university in the world. The moderate strain of Islam taught there both reinforces the traditional moderate Islam practiced in Uzbekistan, as well as fortifies future Uzbek Islamic leaders in refuting the arguments of terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. During the Soviet era, only a handful of state-approved Islamic scholars were allowed by the Central Muslim Board to study at al-Azhar. Many Soviet-era diplomats, interpreters and academics learned Arabic at Tashkent institutes, such as the Oriental Institute. The Egyptian government, one of a handful of

Arab states with a resident diplomatic mission in Tashkent, has found a useful niche in promoting the study of moderate Islam and Arabic.

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